

Conrad says Nekoma missile system is not a done deal



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Don't count on any missile defense systems at Nekoma, N.D., before they're hatched, Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., cautioned Wednesday.

"There are very strong forces who don't want Nekoma, and those forces are very actively engaged in trying to stop it," Conrad said at a Grand Forks press conference. "Even though they are going ahead with the contracting, no one should conclude it's a done deal."

He was referring to reports this week that the U.S. Army is soliciting subcontractors for the first phase of an estimated \$36 billion project to convert the abandoned antiballistic missile site to an interceptor missile facility. The Pentagon doesn't want to put the site in North Dakota, but officials say an existing nuclear arms reduction treaty with the former Soviet Union closes other options.

But Conrad, who favors the Nekoma

site, said those who oppose it won't easily give up their preference for a multisite plan that does not include North Dakota. Another complicating factor, he said, is the project's escalating cost, which has more than doubled in just one year.

Bases also under scrutiny

North Dakota's two Air Force bases also will come under critical scrutiny in coming months, Conrad said in what was a campaign swing through Grand Forks in his bid to finish the unexpired term of the late Sen. Quentin Burdick.

Conrad said the fact that both Grand Forks and Minot Air Force bases are dual-mission bases — with both missile and bomber wings — is in their favor.

Conrad said plans are to arm missile silos at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont., with Minuteman III missiles and to close one Minuteman III base. F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming — having had its MX missiles negotiated away in arms treaties — is left with only Minuteman III missiles.

"Logic dictates that you move those to Malmstrom and close F.E. Warren," Conrad said.

Conrad, who contends drastic measures are needed to reduce the federal deficit, said President-elect Bill Clinton's economic proposals are not necessarily incompatible with that. Speculation is that Clinton may propose forgoing short-term deficit reduction in favor of job creation and economic growth measures, and a longer-term deficit reduction program.

"If it is tied to a longer-term plan that really assures significant deficit reduction, then we would be in accord," Conrad said.

Conrad did not mention his Republican opponent, Jack Dalrymple, in the press conference, focusing instead on his Senate work that has benefited Grand Forks. He cited his efforts in winning full impact-aid funding for Air Force children who attend city schools and efforts on behalf of projects at UND's Energy and Environmental Research Center and Center for Aerospace Sciences.